

Exhibit B

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On the Media: With the Tucson shooting, impatient pundits can't wait till all the facts are in

On the right and left, commentators are weighing in on the accused shooter's political beliefs.

January 11, 2011 | James Rainey

U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and 19 other shooting victims scarcely had been scooped up from a bloodstained shopping center parking lot Saturday when the struggle to politicize, or de-politicize, the mass shooting swept the media.

The skirmishing reached full tilt Monday in the hothouses of radio, cable TV and the Internet, along battle lines that should surprise no one. Conservative talkers argued that politics played absolutely no role in motivating a troubled young gunman. Liberals asserted that vitriolic anti-government rhetoric in the media *had* to have been part of the trigger.

Speculation often overwhelmed real reporting. The cacophony mostly drowned out an admonition that many shouted into the whirlwind: We don't know everything yet. It's too early to know. Only later, if ever, will we get a better sense of the disparate sparks that inflamed what police say was a homicidal rage in Jared Lee Loughner.

With those cautions stated up front, though, it's reasonable to suggest that in this case, overheated, anger-spewing, clownish talk show hosts didn't kill these innocent people. A lone, overheated, deranged young misfit killed these people. What part his muddled political views played, if any, remains to be seen.

Reporting has begun on the state of mental health service in Arizona and the rest of the country. My colleague Steve Lopez is writing about the need for improved services for those with sick minds. That seems like the single most important lesson that could come out of this tragedy.

This is not to say that the country couldn't stand a discussion about overblown, sometimes inciteful, political speech or to give a free pass to anger-spewing, clownish talk show hosts. Their names might not show up in Loughner's journal or Internet postings. But who's to say media provocateurs and their attack-dog rhetoric won't get inside the head of the next crazy loner? Why even take a chance?

The calculated answer, unfortunately, is that anger sells. Anger draws a crowd. Anger can be a money-maker, particularly in a time of economic suffering, when a lot of people are casting about for someone to blame for their miserable lot.

So some media talkers may lower the heat for a day or two. But don't expect the temperate talk to last for long. The intemperance business just has too many fans.

To anyone listening closely the last few days, the distance between what we know about Loughner and what some media pundits would have us believe could not be more striking.

We know that officials at Pima Community College moved to kick Loughner, 22, out of school because he repeatedly disrupted class. An algebra instructor and fellow students found him creepy, even menacing. The U.S. military wouldn't accept Loughner, reportedly because he failed a psychological evaluation. That all seems to point strongly to some psychological disability.

But did any political chatter have an important influence on a fragile mind?

Loughner's My Space page featured a reading list filled with classic books and also "The Communist Manifesto" and "Mein Kampf." A government memo reported a "possible" link between Loughner and the anti-government, anti-immigration, anti-Semitic group American Renaissance. (Rep. Giffords is the first Jewish House member from Arizona.) His Internet postings indicated a loathing of U.S. currency and the Federal Reserve, favorite targets of the political right.

Yet one friend said on Twitter postings that Loughner's political sympathies tended to the left. The Washington Post reported he did not vote in the recent midterm election and belonged to no political party — hardly signs of a virulent tea party activist.

One of his closest friends, Bryce Tierney, told Mother Jones magazine he could not make sense of the alleged shooter's twisted philosophy, other than a distinct dislike of the government and of Rep. Giffords. (Loughner's anger toward the congresswoman may have begun at a constituent meeting in 2007. He asked what was reportedly an incoherent question. She answered in Spanish.)

From that hideous stew of tidbits and mixed inputs, media figures gleaned markedly different conclusions.

On KABC-AM 790 in Los Angeles, host Larry Elder spent part of Monday morning scoffing at the notion that political motivations could have driven Loughner. He called that inherently "incredible" and went on to cite a litany of instances when liberals had used aggressive imagery. (One example was CNN commentator Roland Martin's advice to President Obama to "channel your inner Al Capone and go gangsta against your foes.")

On Fox News, meanwhile, anchor Megyn Kelly looked incredulous at the idea that something more than mental illness might have spurred the carnage. She asked, already seeming to have reached her own conclusion, if sometimes a lunatic is "simply a lunatic."

From across the political divide at MSNBC, Keith Olbermann over the weekend used his "Special Comment" to blame unspecified "politicians and commentators who have brought us to this time of domestic terrorism." He went on to suggest Sarah Palin (with her campaign map with its gun sight-style

targets over the districts of Giffords and other Democrats — a graphic Palin's representatives have now, lamely, tried to disown), Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly among those who encouraged those with "death fantasies and the dreams of blood lust."

Even at the New York Times, where political feature writer Matt Bai insisted it had been impossible to separate "any real political philosophy" from "voices in his head," Bai then couldn't help but join the speculation. "But it's hard not to think," he wrote, that Loughner "was at least partly influenced by a debate that often seems to conflate philosophical disagreement with some kind of political Armageddon."

Who knows which of these comments might come back to make the pundits look foolish after more of the facts are in.

It's hard to resist the temptation to take the shadow reports and half-inferences and let our imaginations run away. Viewing the facts coldly and dispassionately takes an act of intelligence and some willpower. Then we have to admit we don't really know what triggered the bloodshed. And that a final answer may never come.

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